

WHAT IS A SASQUATCH — OR, THE PROBLEMATICS OF REALITY TESTING*

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'Sasquatch' is the Indian name for a giant who is said to live in the wilderness around Harrison Lake and the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. Belief in giants inhabiting wild mountains and remote forests is widespread throughout the world. However, the giants tend to disappear as Western civilization spreads and to survive only in folklore and myths.

The author comes into contact with some patients who believe in the existence of the Sasquatch and express fears of an encounter with such a creature. Other patients regard these fears as 'crazy', and to a newcomer the whole topic of the Sasquatch appears to be fraught with irrationality. It is tempting for a psychiatrist to use it as a device for 'reality testing' in patients. Leighton said that "Reality testing in the tradition of Western empiricism is a criterion advanced by modern psychiatry as an essential component of sanity and mental health." (9) But the more one deals with the judgement of patients on the Sasquatch the more questionable the whole issue becomes, as many of those whose reality testing otherwise proves to be sound, treat the Sasquatch as something very real and they do not doubt its existence.

Historical Notes

When the image of the Sasquatch among the local non-patient population was investigated it was found that it never did disappear from the local scene; on the contrary, the belief in it — and the fear of it — seem to have increased in recent years, and this in spite of rapid modernization in the area. Undoubtedly, tourism promoters draw the Sasquatch to the attention of more people than would otherwise be aware of it but this does not explain the whole phenomenon. Besides the tourist propaganda there are numerous accounts cir-

culating among the local people about actual encounters with hairy giants; the first newspaper story appeared in the *Daily Colonist* on July 3rd, 1882, when the railroad crew apparently captured a strange ape-like creature in the Fraser Canyon.

The Indians of British Columbia have numerous myths and folk tales about giants inhabiting forests and mountains, and these have different names according to the local language. Best known to anthropologists (1,2,3,4,5,6) are the Dzonoqwa and the Boques of the Kwakiutl, the Snénéiq of the Bella Coola and the Sasquatch of the Salishan tribes. The giants live in caves or crude huts in far-off places, high up in the mountains or deep in the forests. They are looked upon as huge human-like beings with dark hairy bodies, black faces and big feet. A strong smell emanating from their bodies is sometimes mentioned. Their size varies from twice that of a man to higher than the highest trees. Although in some myths the giants figure as aggressive and dangerous, killing and devouring people, they are usually depicted as interested in keeping their captives alive to communicate with them. It is told that a giant stole a woman from an Indian village. She was held captive and taught all the giants how to make fire and to catch and cook fish, whereupon they were so grateful that they allowed her to return home and her giant-husband went with her and helped her people to hunt. Numerous tales relate how naughty children, especially those who cry at night or wander off in the woods, are lured into following the woman giant who then blinds their eyes with gum, puts them in her basket and carries them to her home, either to eat them or to keep them for company. The clever child finds a way to escape, and rescues the others as the giants, although strong, are stupid. They are human-like but endowed with supernatural powers. A mother uses the skull of a

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Dzonoqwa as a wash basin for her son. The boy grows up to be very strong, he is called 'hard-skin'. The giants grow huge at will, yet through magical devices man can make them shrink and lose their supernatural powers — these powers allegedly also bring fortune to humans. In many myths their supernatural powers protect the giants from being killed — when shot at they just pull out the arrow and escape. The sight of the powerful Sasquatch was apt to cause 'soul-loss sickness', unconsciousness or upset stomach.

Through the news media or just through hearsay, stories are propagated about Sasquatches stealing fish from the Indians, pursuing hunters in the forests or showing themselves in front of cars on lonely roads. One of the best known stories of the region dates from 1941 when an Indian woman fled in terror from her lonely house on an Indian Reserve near Harrison Lake. She had seen a huge beast strolling towards her over the potato fields. Believing it to be a grizzly bear, some local people went to her house with rifles determined to shoot it, but when they arrived the beast had left. They found salted fish scattered all over and numerous huge human-like foot-prints around the house and in the fields. The woman never returned to live in that house.

Hunters, loggers and other men who work in the wilderness keep each other informed about anything which might throw light on the puzzle; dogs have been put on the tracks to trace the Sasquatch and cameras are kept in readiness to catch the slightest glimpse of a hairy giant. In vain the persistent hunters look for bones or other material evidence, although reports have reached them of Sasquatch dung, hair and even of a jaw bone of unusual size and shape. A few years ago a film of the so-called 'Bigfoot' was taken in California, showing a hairy ape-like figure walking slowly through a clearing in the forest. This film was shown at Harrison Hot Springs in the tourist season and is now on the program in many B.C. movie theatres. Casts of huge foot-prints and several photographs have been on display from time to time

and they arouse strong interest among tourists and local people. It was as a result of all this evidence collecting that the director of the B.C. Provincial Museum wrote: "Do Sasquatches really exist or is the whole business a gigantic hoax? The numerous sights, records and other reports of hairy giants, the photographs of individuals, the innumerable footprints and other types of evidence, all point to the presence of such creatures but until a specimen is obtained the question must remain unresolved" (8).

Much less serious but more conspicuous and appealing to modern man's fascination with science-fiction monsters is the commercial exploitation of the Sasquatch phenomenon. In the Sasquatch Inn and the Sasquatch-Den Cafe, as well as in the souvenir shops, the tourist is offered pamphlets about the hairy giants who still roam the forests around the lake. Caves, valleys, inlets and creeks, mountains and rivers, and even a Provincial Park are named after the giants. The visitor finds postcards, dolls, ash-trays and other souvenirs featuring Sasquatches, accompanied by stereotyped versions of Sasquatch stories, and he is kept in a state of excitement which induces curiosity, annoyance or amusement. Finally buying a souvenir Sasquatch he discovers a small label, 'Made in Norway'. He has bought a troll, the famous mythical Scandinavian giant.

Method

This investigation on the Sasquatch was limited to adults living for more than three years in the Fraser Valley and Harrison Lake region — psychiatric patients were excluded. In the beginning responses were obtained directly in friendly conversations — the respondent was made to feel that the questions were spontaneous, asked by a curious newcomer to the region. Later on a questionnaire was administered to local High School students in Grades XII and XIII, to their teachers and to students over the age of sixteen attending occupational classes. It was found that the written answers did not differ in any significant way from those received in the interviews,

except those from the Indian respondents who tended to give more vivid and personal accounts when interviewed. As there were relatively few Indian respondents available an effort was made to interview as many as possible. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Group I: Indians from Reserves (most with very limited formal education). These respondents or their breadwinners were mainly hunters, fishers and loggers. Fifteen Indians were questioned.

Group II: Relatively uneducated Euro-Canadians. (Grade X or less). These were farmers, loggers, truck-drivers, unskilled workers, housewives, waitresses and occupational class students. Fifty persons in this group were questioned.

Group III: Relatively educated Euro-Canadians. (Grade XII High School education or additional training). These were teachers, businessmen, salesmen, nurses, secretaries and senior students. Sixty persons in this group were questioned.

Results

On the first question: "What is a Sasquatch and what does it look like?" — the Euro-Canadians gave the following answers: 39 'Animal' responses (beast; overgrown ape; prehistoric creature); 41 'Animal/Human' responses (missing link between man and ape; member of the werewolf family; 11 'Human' responses (form of cave-man; mute of Indian origin; wild Indians); 19 'Fiction' responses (imaginary animal; monster; science fiction), and 14 'Publicity Device' responses (public stunt; hoax; tourist attraction; gimmick).

In contrast to the Euro-Canadians the Indians thought of the Sasquatch as being more human than animal-like and there was no suggestion that it is merely fiction or a publicity device. Half the Indians clearly indicated that the Sasquatch is a supernatural being endowed with supernatural power.

On the question "Does the Sasquatch really exist?" more than half of the 125 respondents, namely 65, believed that the

Sasquatch does exist, whereas 22 were in doubt and 38 stated their disbelief. It was found that the more educated Euro-Canadians often quoted material evidence to justify their belief, (footprints; photographs; films; and so on). The lesser educated Euro-Canadians often quoted hearsay as sufficient evidence for their belief. A rather peculiar type of response based on pseudo-logical reasoning was also found in this group; for example, "If dinosaurs can have existed I suppose Sasquatch can exist also"; "I believe it is real because there are so many different kinds of animals on earth"; "I believe in the Sasquatch! Some guys and I fought for the Sasquatch at Harrison School a few years ago, and we won. People don't usually fight for something unless they believe in it." Nearly half the respondents who believed in the Sasquatch offered no explanation for their belief. All the Indians were convinced of its existence and used personal experience and/or tradition as credentials.

Examination of the answers of the doubters reveals that many of them were closer to belief than to disbelief; for example, "I think the Sasquatch could be real, but I do not know"; "I could not really tell you whether there is a Sasquatch or not, but I would probably die of shock if I saw one". Some of the more educated doubters replied in a rather hostile or joking manner, thus revealing a certain frustration when confronted with such questions; for example, "I think you are prejudiced against the Sasquatch if you're so curious about it. Why don't you find one first, then ask questions later?"; "I've never met a Sasquatch, and I never hope to meet one. But I can tell you one thing. I'd rather see one than be one."

Among Euro-Canadians with higher education, 40 per cent stated that they did not believe in the Sasquatch, whereas only 28 per cent of the less educated ones definitely stated their disbelief. Those who gave these negative answers disqualified the Sasquatch as — 'only legend or myth', 'only a publicity device', "Sasquatch is only imagina-

tion or superstition." Some simply stated that they could not believe in the Sasquatch because they had never seen one or lacked clear proof.

The Indians seen in interviews were quite eager to discuss the Sasquatch and elaborated on how family members, ancestors or friends had met one. One Indian hunter gave a vivid description of an experience he had a few years ago:

"Once we went on a hunting trip ten miles up Harrison Lake, we had to stay overnight. As we had nothing to do, we set up some beaver traps at night. We lit a fire and slept on the beach. Next morning we looked in the traps, but they were empty, only in one we found Sasquatch fingers like that of a person's. We went a bit inland. There we saw a dump, filled with branches and we heard somebody sleeping in there. It smelled like a hundred pigs! Very strong. We were scared and went away."

The following story was given by an old Indian:

"A friend of mine was hunting up at Chehalis in the thirties. He had to stay out overnight. He sat under a fallen tree stump and lit a fire. He had a gun across his knees, and he was dozing off. Suddenly he woke up and saw a huge 'man-thing' standing bent over him. It had a deer bone in its mouth. My friend got so frightened, he jumped up, and shot off the gun. The thing ran away. When he was home that night he dreamed that the Sasquatch came and said 'I just wanted to be of help to you, but you scared me with your rifle. You go back there and take the deer bone — it will bring you luck.' So he went up there next day and found the bone and wrapped it in a buckskin and had it on when he went hunting. It was as if the bone drew the deer towards him and he became a very good hunter."

Discussion

As this enquiry has shown, the Sasquatch is not at all a reminiscence of bygone ages. None of the respondents were ignorant of the Sasquatch phenomenon, and their willingness to respond to questions about the hairy giants and also the detailed and vivid accounts given by many indicated an astonishing preoccupation with this subject. Only very few persons in the Fraser Valley and Harrison Lake region treat questions

about the Sasquatch as a joke, and many believe Sasquatches to be living creatures inhabiting forests and mountains. When Indians were asked what they thought about the commercial exploitation of the Sasquatch they would smilingly reply that this is a clever idea but that the white people will never be able to know and understand all about it. That no Sasquatch has yet been captured or shot does not surprise the Indians because he is at home in the forests and mountains whereas the white man is not. Long before hunters, loggers, prospectors and other intruders get a chance to harm him the Sasquatch notices their noisy approach and retreats. Firearms will not kill him because of his supernatural powers.

The Euro-Canadian respondents were often uncertain in their answers and many were in doubt as to whether Sasquatches exist. Those with less education in contrast to those with more, seemed to be more influenced by Indian views, probably because they usually have more contact with Indians in their daily life and they often referred to the Indians when talking about the Sasquatch: "I have heard about Indians in Harrison seeing one; they were scared too" — "Indians know about the Sasquatches, and the Sasquatches know the Indians," — "I believe the Sasquatches have human habits, like the Indians, but they run from white people." This could be interpreted as being native influence on white opinion — a case of reverse acculturation.

Those who live in lonely places, surrounded by the wilderness and by aboriginal peoples with mythological and personal accounts of hairy giants are more apt to believe in and fear unknown oversized creatures than a psychiatrist with an urban middle-class background could possibly imagine. The answer of a European woman who was a nurse before marriage and who is now living with her logger husband in a remote area of B.C. clearly demonstrated how her experience of reality has changed under the overwhelming influence of the natural and cultural environment to which she has been exposed for the last ten years:

"The Sasquatches are the wild ones who only live in forests. Maybe they would kill you if you met them out there. Sometimes they might be crazy. I think they are old people; old, old wild Indians. Sasquaw is the woman, Sasquatch is man and woman. They have long hair, they live in the mountains like the snow-man. You see them sometimes in the beer parlours. They are wild, look like animals. You have to be careful."

Summary

This investigation indicates that it is more difficult for people living in the isolation of remote areas and surrounded by dark forests and mountains to distinguish hearsay, fantasy, imagination and reality than it is for those who walk through illuminated city streets amidst noisy neighbours. A lonely Euro-Canadian farmer when asked about Sasquatches said, "When it is daylight I don't believe in them but at night when I am alone in the mountains or in the bush they could be real."

It is also obvious that formal education is an important factor in determining whether a person has unwavering belief in mythology, and the higher the level of formal education the less a person believes in these phenomena.

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Résumé

Cette étude indique qu'il est plus difficile de distinguer entre le oui-dire, le fantasme, l'imagination et la réalité pour les gens qui vivent dans l'isolement des surfaces reculées et entourées de forêts noires que pour ceux qui se promènent dans les rues illuminées et bruyantes de la ville. Quand on questionna un fermier Euro-Canadien esseulé au sujet des "Sasquatches", il répondit: "A la lumière du jour, je n'y crois pas, mais la nuit, quand je suis seul dans les montagnes ou dans la forêt, il pourrait exister."

Il est aussi évident que l'éducation joue un rôle important chez l'individu concernant sa croyance résolue dans la mythologie et que plus son niveau d'éducation est élevé, moins il croit à ces phénomènes.